



SUNLIGHT  
POLICY CENTER  
— OF NEW JERSEY —

# WHO AND WHAT IS NJ21UNITED?

## ISSUE UPDATE

---

MIKE LILLEY

AUGUST 6, 2020

## WHO IS NJ21UNITED?

### IT SURE LOOKS LIKE ANOTHER DARK MONEY SUPER PAC IN THE SERVICE OF THE NJEA

#### Introduction: The NJEA's Network of Allies

The Sunlight Policy Center of New Jersey (SPCNJ) strives to bring transparency to New Jersey's special-interest-dominated political system. This requires shining a light on the political activities of New Jersey's most powerful special interest, the New Jersey Education Association, (NJEA). As detailed in SPCNJ's report "[A Spider Web of Political Power and Influence](#)," the NJEA tries to keep New Jersey citizens in the dark about the extent of its influence by using secret funding and behind-the-scenes support for its vast network of allies. SPCNJ's goal is to shed light on this network of allies and reveal the true sources of its funding and support.

#### NJ21United Is Portrayed as a Grassroots Group of Parents and Teachers

This past week, an advocacy group named NJ21United made it into the headlines. NJ21United is the group behind a "Week of Action" in support of its #OnlyWhenItsSafe campaign to delay the re-opening of schools due to COVID concerns. The Week of Action included calling superintendents, occupying bridges and a social media day, and culminated in a "motor march" on Trenton on August 3.

To be clear, there are certainly good reasons why both teachers and parents would be nervous about a re-opening of New Jersey's public schools, and SPCNJ respects the right of all New Jersey citizens to express their views, including the NJEA and its members.

Yet newspaper accounts uniformly presented NJ21United as a grassroots, parent-and-teacher movement. NorthJersey.com's headline was: "Teachers, parents kick off week of action to oppose school reopening in New Jersey." The story spoke of a "growing chorus of parents and educators" calling for a delayed reopening of schools.<sup>1</sup> The Star-Ledger described NJ21United as a "grassroots education advocacy group."<sup>2</sup> A reader might come away with the impression that NJ21United is a spontaneous, grassroots effort by a group of concerned citizens.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Hannan Adely, Teachers, parents kick off week of action to oppose school reopening in New Jersey," *NorthJersey.com*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2020/07/27/coronavirus-nj-protests-grow-over-reopening-schools/5473056002/>.

<sup>2</sup> Avalon Zoppo, "Teachers hit the street to protest reopening of schools during pandemic: 'It's not safe.'" *nj.com*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.nj.com/education/2020/07/teachers-in-this-nj-county-hit-the-streets-to-protest-reopening-schools-during-pandemic-its-not-safe.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The NorthJersey.com story did note that co-founder Chris Canella is president of the Cedar Grove Education Association, and that NJ21United was founded in 2019 by New

## NJ21United Is Actually a “Dark Money” Super PAC

But there’s much more to the story. NJ21United is not a spontaneous, grassroots effort. NJ21United was launched over a year ago as a 501(c)(4), which means that it is a “dark money” Super PAC that can spend unlimited amounts of money for political causes and does not have to disclose its donors. It appears to be well-funded: it has a high-quality website, robust social media platforms, sophisticated political organizing action-plans, and a staff of veteran political organizers.

NJ21United bears a remarkable resemblance to New Direction New Jersey (NDNJ), another dark money Super PAC that pushes the NJEA’s agenda. SPCNJ exposed the NJEA’s millions in secret funding for NDNJ, which forced NDNJ to come clean that the NJEA provided 70 percent of NDNJ’s budget.<sup>4</sup>

Like NDNJ, NJ21United is a dark money group that does not have to disclose its donors, so SPCNJ asks: who is funding NJ21United?

## NJ21United Has Deep Ties to the NJEA and Is Part of the NJEA’s Network

The NJEA has deep ties to NJ21United. NJ21United is actually a “statewide caucus of NJEA members” whose purpose is to build coalitions with community members and parents.<sup>5</sup>

This is very much the NJEA’s *modus operandi*. As detailed in SPCNJ’s “[A Spider Web of Political Power and Influence](#),” the NJEA often uses trained political organizers to mobilize parents and communities behind its favored causes. This helps the NJEA broaden its reach, enlarge its impact on decision-makers, and disguise its controlling role. Accordingly, the NJEA supports numerous groups that seek to enlist and mobilize parents, including the Statewide Education Organizing Committee, Save Our Schools, Parents Unified for Local School Education, among others. The result is a multitude of campaigns that cover just about every conceivable policy issue, such as Healthy Schools Now, Our Children/Our Schools and others. NJ21United and its current #OnlyWhenItsSafe campaign fit precisely into the NJEA’s *modus operandi*.

The NJEA also uses NJ21United to organize and mobilize teachers. In the attack against Senator Sweeney’s *Path to Progress* pension and benefit reform plan, NJ21United provides separate talking points for pensions, healthcare and sick-day payouts (all traditional NJEA issues). At the bottom of each, it states: “Luckily, the NJEA and other like-minded groups are FIGHTING BACK against these attacks on you and your

---

Jersey Education Association (NJEA) members and has advocated for reforms to pensions and healthcare, equitable school funding and social justice issues in schools.

<sup>4</sup> See SPCNJ’s report “[NJEA: New Jersey’s Political Machine](#).”

<sup>5</sup> NJ21United, “Safe Reopening of Schools Town Hall,” *nj21united.com*, accessed July 29, 2020, [https://www.nj21united.org/uploads/1/2/4/7/124709277/safe\\_return\\_to\\_school.pdf](https://www.nj21united.org/uploads/1/2/4/7/124709277/safe_return_to_school.pdf).

profession.” Next to it is a statement attributed to the NJEA’s leadership: “We are confident that the 200,000 members of the NJEA are ready, willing and organized to fight for the future of our profession.”<sup>6</sup>

NJ21United is part of a larger effort by the NJEA’s parent, the National Education Association, to organize teachers for political purposes. A prominent NJ21United logo contains the NEA’s #Red4Ed hashtag. #Red4Ed is a NEA’s campaign to mobilize teachers for political action. Like NJ21United, Red4Ed calls for “the public schools our students deserve,” and lists very much the same objectives as NJ21United.<sup>7</sup>

Further solidifying this relationship is that fact that both the NEA and NJ21United use the digital media firm Action Network to mobilize teachers, engage local communities and organize collective actions.<sup>8</sup> Action Network is another 501(c)(4) dark money group with labor union roots. Its goal is to “empower progressive activism through organizing, mobilization and digital strategies.”<sup>9</sup> Action Network’s digital political organizing platform was developed by “organizers with deep ties to the labor movement”<sup>10</sup> in collaboration with the AFL-CIO (parent of the American Federation of Teachers).

### NJ21United Was Launched to Support the NJEA’s Political Agenda

NJ21United was launched as a statewide political organizing group to push the NJEA’s agenda, and it is staffed accordingly. As NJ21United states in its Local Rally Toolkit: “There are several members of NJ21United that have political, union, and community organizing experience, and even training from national organizations.” These are political organizing pros, or as NJ21United described: “people who plan things like this all the time.”<sup>11</sup> The toolkit provides expert advice on logistics, social media strategy, press relations and outreach. NJ21United’s political pros stand by ready to help.

---

<sup>6</sup> NJ21United, “Talking Points,” *nj21united.org*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.nj21united.org/talking-points.html>.

<sup>7</sup> National Education Association, “Red For Ed,” *neatoday.com*, accessed July 29, 2020, <http://neatoday.org/redfored/>.

<sup>8</sup> National Education Association, “Unite, Inspire, Lead, Our Students, Our Union, Our Future,” 2017 NEA National Leadership Summit, February 24-26, 2017, *nea.org*, accessed July 30, 2020, [http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/COM417\\_YOUNG\\_Action\\_Network.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/COM417_YOUNG_Action_Network.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Action Network, “About Us,” *actionnetowrk.org*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://actionnetwork.org/about>.

<sup>10</sup> Seth Pinckney, “Solidarity! Announcing the Action Squared Union,” *medium.com*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://medium.com/powering-progressive-movements/solidarity-announcing-the-action-squared-union-fd73df656aea>.

<sup>11</sup> NJ21United, “Tools for Action, Local Rally Toolkit,” *nj21united.com*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.nj21united.org/tools-for-action.html>.

In its current “About Us” section,<sup>12</sup> NJ21United does not even mention #OnlyWhenItsSafe or COVID-related issues. Instead, it states that NJ public school students deserve, in addition to full funding, quality resources, and an understanding of how social issues and intersectionality affect them:

- Highly qualified experienced public employees who receive a fair and just compensation; and
- Unionized school employees, including support staff, that have collective bargaining rights and job protections

These are all traditional parts of the NJEA’s lobbying agenda.

Likewise, in its “Demands,” NJ21United declares that that public education is “severely under attack,” and lists its goals:<sup>13</sup>

- Restore public-school funding to pre-recession levels through corporate tax accountability;
- Provide access to affordable quality healthcare;
- No more pension give-backs;
- Competitive pay and job protections for all education support staff; and
- End public funding of charter schools

Again, this is the NJEA’s agenda. #OnlyWhenItsSafe or COVID-related issues are not mentioned.

#### NJ21United’s Political Actions Matched Its Words

All during 2019, long before the COVID pandemic, NJ21United engaged in multiple activities in support of the NJEA’s agenda:<sup>14</sup>

- Fought the outsourcing of custodians, paraprofessionals and bus drivers;
- Opposed the closure of public schools in Camden;
- Attacked Senate President Sweeney’s *Path to Progress* pension reform plan;
- Lobbied for Chapter 78 (healthcare) reform;
- Rallied with Communications Workers of America (CWA) in favor of a state budget with a millionaire’s tax and against *Path to Progress*;
- Joined a legal action in support of Governor Murphy’s investigation of the Economic Development Authority targeting George Norcross; and
- Protested at four Sweeney-Norcross events across the state.

---

<sup>12</sup> NJ21United, “About Us,” *nj21united.org*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.nj21united.org/about-us.html>.

<sup>13</sup> NJ21United, “Support Our Demands,” *nj21united.com*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://actionnetwork.org/forms/support-nj21united>.

<sup>14</sup> NJ21United, “About Us,” *nj21united.org*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.nj21united.org/about-us.html>.

In 2020, right up until March 10, 2020, NJ21Unite’s main focus was on a planned March 14 “Path to Progress Members Summit,” for NJEA members. The main issues were traditional NJEA issues such as reforming the Chapter 78 healthcare law, the millionaire’s tax, state aid for schools and the Economic Development Authority tax breaks.<sup>15</sup> Other focus issues included out-sourcing of education support personnel and the activities of various teachers unions.

All of this was in support of the NJEA’s agenda. Up until March 10, 2020, this was NJ21United’s agenda. NJ21United was a teacher and parent organizing tool for the NJEA’s agenda.

### When COVID Hit, NJ21United Pivoted to Organizing for the NJEA’s COVID Priorities

With the new reality presented by the COVID pandemic, NJEA President Marie Blistan has made very clear that the NJEA wants to delay school openings: “If we are looking to have schools open on the regular calendar, that’s not possible.”<sup>16</sup> The NJEA has also set out specific health and safety requirements for schools in the absence of which schools should not resume in-person learning.<sup>17</sup>

Like the NJEA, NJ21United has pivoted and become the NJEA’s member- and parent-organizing vehicle for its COVID-related policy stances. As might be expected, NJ21United’s co-founder Chris Canella mirrors the NJEA’s stance, stating that “the rush to go back isn’t educationally sound,” and called for all remote learning until it is safe to return.<sup>18</sup>

True to the NJEA’s *modus operandi*, NJ21United launched its #OnlyWhenItsSafe political organizing campaign, of which the Week of Action is a part. On the topic of re-opening schools, NJ21United exhorted: “A Call to Action! We need to organize before schools reopen!”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> NJ21United, “Facebook, February 12, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/nj21united/photos/gm.493010091644643/492681677970914>.

<sup>16</sup> Mike Kelly, “Reopening NJ schools might take a while,” *The Record*, July 17, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> New Jersey Education Association, “NJEA testifies to Assembly Education Committee on Schools Reopening, *njea.org*, accessed July 30, 2020, <https://www.njea.org/njea-testifies-to-assembly-education-committee/>.

<sup>18</sup> Hannan Adely, Teachers, parents kick off week of action to oppose school reopening in New Jersey,” *NorthJersey.com*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2020/07/27/coronavirus-nj-protests-grow-over-reopening-schools/5473056002/>.

<sup>19</sup> NJ21United, “Current Actions,” *nj21united.org*, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.nj21united.org/current-actions.html>.

True to its mission, NJ21United is seeking to bring in parents to join the campaign. In its toolkit for the Week of Action,<sup>20</sup> NJ21United provides sophisticated action-plans with detailed guidance and even unique bar codes for the organizers of each of the events. NJ21United makes very clear the purpose of the campaign: “Relationships need to be established between families and staff ... even before buildings are opened.”

Key policy points for the Week of Action include:

- Rather than start in-person learning, schools must make sure sanitation protocols, training and remote learning capabilities are in place;
- No re-opening of schools until New Jersey has zero new COVID cases for 14 days (in other words, no in-person learning for a long time);
- Equal representation for local associations on school re-opening committees;
- All staff and students provided with necessary PPE;
- New Jersey must apply for a federal waiver for standardized testing for the 2020/2021 school year (in other words, no standardized testing for the year);
- The state must continue its moratorium on new charter schools or charter expansions.

All of these support the NJEA’s positions, two of which are only tangentially related to COVID-related, school-reopening issues. Do New Jersey parents who join NJ21United realize that they are being co-opted for traditional NJEA lobbying priorities such as limiting standardized tests or curbing charter schools?

#### Conclusion: New Jersey Citizens Should Know What NJ21United Is

The sole purpose of this report is to identify the true nature of NJ21United. News accounts have portrayed NJ21United as a grassroots education advocacy group of parents and teachers that are voicing their concerns about a re-opening of schools. But this is not accurate. NJ21United is another in a long line of dark money PACs and political organizing groups that are part of the NJEA’s longstanding *modus operandi*. The NJEA knows very well that such groups improve its political clout by appearing to be grassroots organizations that spontaneously align with the NJEA’s policy agenda.

The NJEA sees the battle over the re-opening of schools as a political battle. The reality is that, as a Super PAC, NJ21United is an often-used tool in the NJEA’s arsenal for that battle. Indeed, legislation has been introduced in the Assembly that calls for a delayed start for in-person learning with the future decision to reopen based on an assessment of the risk and the readiness. This appears to be very close to the NJEA’s and NJ21United’s position. Can we expect that soon NJ21United will be lobbying for the legislation?

---

<sup>20</sup> NJ21United, “NJ21United #OnlyWhenItsSafe Week of Action Toolkit,” *nj21united.com*, accessed July 29, 2020, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VV1ml\\_HGyo3oRgo\\_wfhPDhKHZLCbLnG14Vi7z3TmEyA/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VV1ml_HGyo3oRgo_wfhPDhKHZLCbLnG14Vi7z3TmEyA/edit).



SPCNJ believes that it is important for New Jersey citizens and decision-makers to know what NJ21United is: another dark money Super PAC pushing the NJEA's agenda. Parents and concerned citizens are of course free to join NJ21United, but everyone should know who and what they are supporting.